

The wiry young mountain climber clung by his chalk-white fingers to a huge boulder on the side of Mt. Woodson, just northeast of Poway, and, at about 2,000 feet up, he yelled a command:

"Toothbrush!"

Below him, standing like goats on a mountainside, was a line of other climbers. Some looked as if they had just emerged from a punk rock concert. At the farthest end of the line, another young man acknowledged the request.

"Toothbrush," he said as he passed it up the line like water in a bucket brigade.

"Toothbrush, toothbrush," each climber repeated as it was passed up to the climber who needed it.

The scene was part of a bouldering competition. The toothbrush is a mighty tool in this arduous, painful, knee-scraping sport. It is difficult to cling to the side of a boulder as you climb it straight up. When a finger hole in a rock is dirty with loose granite grit, then you must brush the grit out. And some of the holes are so tiny, only a toothbrush can clean them out.

Brushing away the loose grit is insurance you will have a firm finger hold on the mountain as you manipulate your body around the contours of the rock.

Rock climbing -- bouldering, in specific -- is a growing sport in San Diego County. And Poway may become the Mecca of rock climbers from the world over. A tall, handsome German youth, his thick blond hair tangled by the wind, said the local cracks in the boulders were some of the best in the world.

People from La Jolla, Poway, Encinitas, Los Angeles, Boulder, Colo., and Munich, Germany -- 200 to 250 in all -- gathered recently on Mt. Woodson to pit their wits and brawn against the hard facts of life, in this case granite boulders, many bigger than a two-story house.

The gathering was more of a happening than a contest.

A frustrated child at one point lay on his back and screamed into the moist mountain air (it had rained the day before and it appeared there would be a rerun). Other small children ran and squealed with delight. Dogs yelped. And, about a third of the way up Mt. Woodson, the din of people chatting and laughing filled the air. They were registering for the event -- and socializing.

Hawks made lazy circles overhead. (On the mountaintop, those lazy circles are below you.)

A young man with skinny, muscular legs, wearing tiger-striped tights, suddenly bolted from his friends and did a handstand; then he stood up and kicked a leg high over his head. After this energetic outburst, he returned to his friends, and their conversations and stretching exercises continued.

Climbers assure you their sport may be painful at times, but, all in all, it's just plain fun.

This is usually said before or after the actual struggle on the rocks.

The truth of the matter is bouldering is grueling, both mentally and physically.

The mental part begins when a climber sizes up a boulder. You, as a hiker, may see a big rock too steep to climb. The climber, however, sees almost invisible knobs and tiny ledges -- or cracks he can jam his hands and knees and elbows into.

Once the climber has sized up the task, he reaches behind him and grabs a handful of chalky material from a

pouch and dusts his hands thoroughly.

Then carefully, with the quickness of a sloth, he gains a toehold, then a finger hold and performs what looks impossible. He ascends straight up a rock that not even a mountain goat could scale.

It's either that or fall.

Falling, of course, is a major part of the sport. When the fall could be fatal or nearly fatal, a rope secured to the top of the boulder and held below by a judge is attached to the climber. It's for falling only. And it is not unusual to see people dangling from boulders.

Oops.

"Bouldering is basically the gymnastics of rock climbing," said Christian Griffith, a university psychology senior from Boulder, Colo. Other climbers say Griffith is one of the best and they were pleased he had shown up to compete locally.

"It's purely physical. It's people, the rock and gravity. It's trying to find the hardest move you can do on a rock. You don't worry about anything (like climbing aids). You use just your hands and your feet to get up the rock."

Controlling fear of heights is part of mountain climbing.

Griffith said that the use of safety ropes frees climbers "from anything but thinking about getting up the rock."

He said training is continual: "You don't train for a race; you don't have a mark on the calendar. You don't think, 'Well, March 29 I'll be at the peak of my fitness. You train, then you wait for a good day and the weather's good and you feel good, and then you go try hard to climb."

Gunther Zaeschmar, a retired solid-state physicist who maintains residences in Ocean Beach and Berlin, West Germany, was studying the mountainside through the view-finder of his camera. He was a climber for years; but now, retired, he's mostly a spectator.

"Bouldering, I would say, is yoga on the rocks." Zaeschmar smiled after saying that.

He said he turned to bouldering in 1970 to "ward off psychosomatic and nervous illnesses; I worked under lots of stress as a physicist for this government of ours here." He wasn't smiling when he said that.

He said climbing reduced his stress when he was caught up in the "rat race."

"I'm interested in photography now," he said. "I want to show these things to my friends in Germany, especially in East Germany. They don't know about this."

Shawn Curtis, a climber for 14 years, hails from Los Angeles but lives in Encinitas today. He makes a living as an emergency medical technician (EMT) for an ambulance firm. Mountain rescue is a specialty of his.

"Climbing is a lot of fun," he said. "It's like a chess problem you're doing in your head. You're looking around and figuring a hole out and you're way above the ground, and you are usually in a very pretty place doing it.

"And the challenge is there, too."

Curtis was on hand "as insurance," should someone be injured. He looked around him and smiled.

"The climbers you will see here today are the very best climbers in the world. They climb day in and day out."

He described them as the Olympians of climbing.

Michael Paul of La Jolla has taught climbing professionally for 12 years. He's an instructor for Vertical Adventures out of Redondo Beach (Los Angeles).

"Besides being my livelihood, it's what I like to do most of all above anything else," he said. "I used to race bicycles, surf and do other outdoor sports. But I found that this offers the most challenge and diversity.

"You have to have a good grasp of abstract concepts.

"When you are climbing you have to be able to support all of your body weight by your fingernails, maybe. You have to have the mental processes that allow you to get rid of pain feelings; how to quell fear -- because you are dealing with fear and pain and a lot of other unpleasanties."

He said climbing is much more arduous than surfing.

"You are fighting gravity," he said, "and it's really difficult. A lot of climbing is digging your fingers into sharp scratches in the rock and withstanding the pain."

Michael Brauser, a high school physical education teacher in Munich, West Germany, and friend of Paul, said he learned about Mt. Woodson from reading European climbing magazines.

He said the mountain is "really special because it is a special crack-climbing area -- with vertical seams between the rocks."

He came to California to climb two months ago and he and Paul had just left the Joshua Tree Monument area, a popular region for climbers. He has climbed at Yosemite, too.

Werner Landry, a geologist for Geotechnical Exploration, Kearny Mesa, is a local pioneer among bouldering enthusiasts. He has organized contests in the past. He said that geologically, Mt. Woodson is a new region, having become the remains of a large stone mountain that came apart more than a few million years.

The fact that it is still breaking up eon by eon makes for good climbing.

"All these people use bouldering as a way of staying in shape to go climbing. Bouldering is just a few feet. Climbing is a thousand feet," Landry said.

On this Saturday he was helping judge other climbers.

Dave Tapes, who races mountain bikes when he isn't climbing, stood and yelled instructions to another climber on a boulder called "The Cave."

He had succeeded on his second attempt. "I choked on the first try. Leaned back too far," he said.

He was saved by the rope, of course; otherwise, this young Laguna Beach man would have been under the care of Curtis.

Now that he had succeeded, he yelled encouragement to a friend.

"Lower, Jeff, on the knob. Lower, lower. The knob in the crack."

He turned to a reporter and said,

"You see, there's this little knob there he doesn't see yet."

Then he turned and yelled again:

"Jeff, there's a knob that doesn't look like a knob at the bottom of the crack!

"That's it," he yelled as the climber's foot caught hold of the knob. "You're in! That's it, dude. Now reach! Further left!"

Jeff pulled himself over the top of The Cave and Tapes called out, "All riiiiight!"

This type of coaching was not unusual even among competitors.

"There's a lot of unity out here," Tapes said.

The recent competition was organized by Carmel Schimmel, a surface analyst for Diafin of La Jolla. She said local climbers were eager to have a competition; however, no one was arranging one. So she did.

She, like other female climbers at the competition, tackles boulders to relieve tension.

Of Mt. Woodson, she said, "The locals are pretty quiet about this area. They're sort of keeping it to themselves.

"It's a very special place because it's so close to the suburbs. People can have a serious job, then they can climb out here very hard and develop a high standard of ability.

She said Rick Piggott, a member of the **Poway Mountain Boys**, helped set up the course. Climbing the boulders to attach safety ropes was a giant task in itself.

Ron Kauk ripped off the tape from one of his hands and let out a little groan in pain, which wrinkled his face. He had just completed the toughest climb of the day, called "Airstream."

He looked down on the boulder he had just ascended and explained how he did it.

"This is a kind of trick jamming situation called a hand stack. When you're doing the hand stack you try to move your legs and arms in one motion. You stack your hands, then jam your knee. And with your hands stacked, you can't let go until your knees jam. Then you can move your hands."

Tape on both his hands and both his knees eased the pain. By stacking he meant wedging his fists into a crack so they supported his body weight. Then he would jam his knees in tight to support his weight on the side of the steep rock.

What do you do when you aren't climbing, he was asked.

"Eat and sleep."

Kauk is a professional climber who teaches the skill for the Yosemite Mountaineering School.

He is a young man held in awe by other climbers. His mere presence gave a touch of class to the event.

When asked if he was a contender in the competition, he smiled at the question he doesn't hear from his peers and said, "Yeah."

He won in the expert division.

Bart Berry of Aquarius Adventures, Del Mar, a tall, lean fellow, said the thinner you are, the better in mountain sports. You don't want excess weight, he said.

He tapes his hands for protection after applying tincture benzoin to fight infections.

"I have to put tape on my hands," he said, "but some people have real tough skin. Some people develop a lot of scar tissue."

Jermiah Padgett, 12, a stocky, muscular lad from Idyllwild, said this was his first try at bouldering. He's no stranger to the ins and outs of mountains. The Idyllwild Elementary School sixth grader looked at some of the boulders he had scaled and summed up the sport.

"I think it's rough."

And the expression on his young face was as stern as a rock.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Jimmy Thornton, Tribune Staff Writer, 'Is it rock climbing? No, the name is...Boulding', *Evening Tribune* (online), 8 Apr 1986 C-1
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